

Philosophy Corner:

What is a Composer?

By Nathan M. Schilz

I have a couple of things to say before I begin my dialogue. Firstly, I suppose, is to affirm that this is indeed a dialogue. Philosophy is not supposed to be doctrinal and stifling to thought. It was born out of a sense of wonder and exploration. The second note I have is simply that I will be covering a wide range of topics relevant to composers. Feel free to contact me to offer topic suggestions or to tell me I am wrong. I hope these ruminations will serve to help you reflect upon your craft in a more meaningful and profound way.

What, then, *is* your craft? What is this “music” anyway? What is a composer? What is art? All of these topics—and more—will be touched upon in these quarterly philosophical morsels.

My Uncle Bill at a recent family gathering sat across the table and looking searchingly at me inquired, “So, how does one come to call himself a composer?” Now, I don’t know my uncle Bill all that well, so I scrambled to give him my short list of accomplishments and even longer list of aspirations. But, after the pleasantries of polite chat faded, the question still gnawed at me: how can I call myself a composer?

There are many moments in a composer’s life that are meaningful for him or indicative of his future vocation. Many of you, like me, have stories about kindergarten talent shows and other such embarrassing tales that may have initiated our lives as musicians. But, when were we truly “composers”?

I hold this term in great esteem. I do not believe in a relativity that would suggest that just anyone could ascribe to such a lofty label. I, myself, am often too humbled to utter the word in regard to myself knowing its lineage and those who I could never emulate; I fear that my hubris might make me ridiculous. Am I a composer? I think Stravinsky sums up my trepidation when he says, “To the voice that commands me to write, I first respond with fear.”¹

Part of me wants to say that a composer becomes a composer the first time he is paid for his work. But, this, of course, is a narrow and ludicrous notion. This is perhaps when a career or profession of music begins, but not when a composer *becomes* a composer.

I would like to posit this: a composer becomes a composer the first time another person hears his work and acknowledges it as the composer’s original work.

Music is inherently two things: temporal and communal. Music, in order to be called such, must be intentional—and its intent is to engage an intellect (more on that in later articles).

¹ Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music: In the Form of Six Lessons*, trans. Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), 65.

If a tree falls in the woods and there is no one around to hear it, it does *not* make a sound. Sound presupposes an auditor (i.e. listener). Sound is not a *thing*, but an event in time—dynamic waves and vibrations in air and objects.

Written notes on staff paper are not music but simply directions to a performer; even this article itself is not language proper but dictation of language—you have to read it aloud in your head, right? So, too, are the vibrations caused by a felled tree not sound until they are heard by some being.

Music is different than simple sound because music requires an intentional creator and an active listener. Because the work yearns to be experienced, in virtue of the intrinsically communal nature of music itself, it must be heard for it to be complete.

Heidegger discusses in his “Origin of the Work of Art” that art actually opens up a world.² This world gives us a glimpse not of just beauty, but truth itself. This is what draws human beings to the highly contemplative activity of music.

Now, one could rightfully argue that the composer himself is the primary auditor of any composition he creates. Sound (and therefore music) requires three things: a producer, a medium for transmission, and a listener—all three of which could be satisfied by a single knowing being.

But, to truly be a composer, for that is what this article is about, *someone else* must experience your world. You must connect cosmically in the realm of contemplation and reveal your will and the truth within your art to another person. Only then can you officially call yourself a composer.

It doesn't matter if you ever get paid for this work or if you become rich and famous. What matters is that you share your music with others and let them experience the truth within.

So, play on!

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Want to see a topic covered in this column? E-mail the writer here at philosophycorner@nmscomposer.com.

² Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Philosophies of Art & Beauty: Selected Reading in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*, ed. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976)